

Faculty Research Grant Proposal (\$500)

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I. Project Title, Summary, and Abstract

1. Title

The Limits of Moral Education in the Fiction of Elizabeth Inchbald

2. Brief General Description

An examination of the implicit theory of moral education in two works by the eighteenth-century English writer Elizabeth Inchbald; the works under consideration are her two novels *A Simple Story* (1791) and *Nature and Art* (1796).

3. Project Summary

I am requesting funding to present a paper at the meeting of the Midwest American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (MWASECS) in Oklahoma City, October 9-11, 2008—one of two papers I plan to present next year. The other will be at the meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) in Richmond, Virginia in March, 2009. Both papers represent sections of an article I'm working on concerning the fiction of Elizabeth Inchbald, the English actress, playwright, and novelist of the late 18th and early 19th century. My first paper will address Inchbald's implicit views on moral education. Generally categorized as a "Jacobin" novelist, Inchbald is often said to be interested in education as a means to a more enlightened, just society. This is, however, a critical cliché which examination of her fiction does not fully support and which distorts our understanding of her significance. The conference in October represents an opportunity to put my ideas

before the scholarly community before developing them in more detail for publication.

II. Narrative

1. Current Situation in Inchbald studies

England in the 1790s was torn by fierce ideological conflict as a result of the political events across the Channel. Faced with the violent realities of the French Revolution, England was swept with a wave of political and religious reaction. Progressive thinkers, now labeled “Jacobins” and considered all but treasonous, either retreated into silence or went aggressively on the offensive, challenging the norms of English social, political, and religious beliefs. One of these opposition writers was the actress, playwright, and novelist Elizabeth Inchbald, author of *A Simple Story* (1791) and *Nature and Art* (1796).

Among the major concerns of such English “Jacobins” as William Godwin and Thomas Holcroft were theories of moral education, largely inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile*. Godwin, Holcroft and others hoped that some form of progressive education could prove liberating for individuals and lead England to a more just, enlightened society. As an associate of Godwin and Holcroft, Inchbald is often said to shared their pedagogical interests. Examination of her novels, however, suggests that if this is true at all, it is only in the most restricted sense. As a satirist, Inchbald dissects the ways that societal pressures on the young serve to narrow and enslave their intellects, constrict their generosity, and cloud their moral reasoning. She is relentless, and often wildly funny, is dramatizing how the aristocracy

perpetuates its power by squeezing the moral and intellectual life out of its children. On the other hand, inspection of her kind, rational, generous characters suggests nothing in terms of their own education. The benign characters in Inchbald's fiction arrive at moral and emotional health despite, rather than because of, their environment, not having been trained in moral virtue so much as simply possessing an inexplicable immunity to society's corrupting forces. There is nothing here on which to build a program of positive moral education, though it suggests that even the greatest pressures to conformity will fail to completely stunt the natural, healthy development of some people's moral intuitions.

Inchbald is something of an enigma among English intellectuals of the period. Like her fellow progressives, she is strongly influenced by the Enlightenment *philosophes*. She is also, however, unlike them, a devout Roman Catholic. As such, she is always struggling to square her radical thought with her ties to the Catholic Church. This energetic but often confused struggle has led her to being misunderstood and misrepresented both in her day and ours. The earliest scholarship on Inchbald plays down her political radicalism to make her more palatable to the early Victorians. Modern scholarship champions her progressive thought, especially in gender relations, but demonstrates a marked discomfort with her religion. Trying to align Enlightenment social attitudes with eighteenth-century Catholic piety will obviously be messy and difficult, but her work is best understood as the site of the struggle between these two aspects of her thought.

I first developed a scholarly interest in Elizabeth Inchbald after assigning her first novel, *A Simple Story*, in my Eighteenth-Century Fiction course a few years ago.

In teaching the novel, I developed ideas about its religious implications that had not been noted in the critical literature. Over the next few years, I presented two papers (2002, 2005), reviewed a biography of Inchbald (2004), and published an article on *A Simple Story* in the peer-reviewed scholarly annual *Age of Johnson* (2006). I now plan to continue my analysis, extending it to her second novel, *Nature and Art*, which I assigned students for the first time two years ago and will be teaching again in Spring Term, 2008. My work on Inchbald has represented the richest cross-fertilization between my teaching and my scholarship at Elmhurst College.

2. The Project Plan

My work on this project began two years ago. I was scheduled to deliver a paper on *Nature and Art* at the MWASECS conference in 2006 but was prevented from doing so for medical reasons, though I had completed all the necessary research and largely worked out my ideas. I am now returning to this project. As I mentioned, I will be teaching *Nature and Art* in Spring Term, 2008, and will see what further scholarship has been published in the last two years. This summer I plan to draft both conference talks and sketch out the article, which I plan to have ready for submission by summer 2009.

3. Faculty Expertise

I have been publishing scholarly work in eighteenth-century literature since 1985. I currently have six articles and chapters, thirteen conference talks, and thirteen book reviews in the area, including the work on Inchbald described above. I served one

year as president of the Midwest American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and for two years chaired the ASECS Teaching Committee. Since coming to Elmhurst, I have taught eighteenth-century literature in the British Literature surveys as well as being exclusively responsible for ENG 421: *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*.

4. Plans for Evaluation and Dissemination

My work will be presented at the conferences in Oklahoma City and Richmond. The responses I receive there will help me refine my presentation for the article I will submit to one of the peer-reviewed scholarly publications in the field. I would expect to submit it first to *Age of Johnson*, which carried my earlier article on Inchbald. Otherwise, it would be suitable for *1650-1820: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era* (where I have also published); *Eighteenth-Century Novels*; or *Eighteenth-Century Women*. I would also make an informal presentation of my work in a “brown bag” colloquium on campus.

III. Budget

Round-Trip Air Fare: Currently starts at \$367.

Hotel: Three nights (10/9, 10, 11): \$300+

Meals: Thursday, 10/9, through Sunday, 10/12

I am requesting \$500, which the airfare and hotel bill alone will exhaust. I will seek supplementary funding from the Department of English and the Dean.